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ABSTRACT

Writing research papers is challenging for many graduate students. In part, this problem stems from the fact that, while many students have considerable undergraduate experience with writing prose and other narrative styles, they often have little or no experience with writing in a more technical style which includes, for example, a literature review and clear documentation of sources. This paper assesses the effects of a writing workshop with eight graduate students working toward doctorates in clinical psychology. The workshop exercises were designed to accomplish three goals: (1) "normalize" students' concerns about their writing; (2) improve their basic technical writing skills; and (3) increase their motivation to write and to learn about technical writing. After the workshop, students reported that they were relieved to know they were not the only ones with concerns about writing, they had more confidence about their writing and less fear about writing. Although there were signs that participants' writing may have improved, it remains to be seen whether the improvement will be sustained over time. (Contains 13 references.) (MAH)

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A Study on Process-Oriented Writing in Graduate Education

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Learning to Write, Writing to Learn:

A Study on Process-Oriented Writing in Graduate Education

Rationale and Identification of Research Question:

Writing research papers is challenging for many graduate students. In fact, comments like "dread" and "fear" are not uncommon when students describe their feelings and experiences with writing research papers. In part, this problem stems from the fact that while many students have considerable experience as undergraduates with writing prose and other narrative styles, they often have little or no experience with writing in a more technical style which includes, for instance, a literature review and clear documentation of sources.

The purpose of the present research was to assess the effects of a writing workshop that was unique in process and content that would both empower students about their own writing skills and also reduce their anxieties about technical writing.

Statement of Relationship to the Literature:

In addition to the aforementioned lack of experience that many students have with technical writing, what are other common sources of writing difficulties? Robert Boice (1990) details several of these writing difficulties: (a) the internal self-critic, (b) a fear of failure, (c) early experience and (d) procrastination. I will now discuss each of these, in turn. The essence of the internal critic is that people often try to simultaneously edit their work as they create it. The problem with this strategy is that because ideas are often judged as worthy or unworthy, they are prevented from even being expressed on paper. According to Harris (1985) a further problem with the internal critic is that it interferes with an individual's creativity and limits the development of self-confidence. Second, lacking self-confidence, students fear failure (Daly, 1985). This sentiment is affirmed by the words of a particular student who said: "I feel like an impostor; I am in graduate school and I don't know how to write." According to Boice, the third source of writing problems

stems from an individual's early experiences with writing. Students often remember their early teachers as individuals who didn't make writing enjoyable and failed to provide them with information or experiences that could make students better writers (Flowers & Hayes, 1977). Finally, given the three other difficulties, it is perhaps not surprising that students often procrastinate on their writing projects. The problem with this approach is that it often results in an anxiety-ridden "last minute" scramble to complete an assignment, thereby minimizing the enjoyment of the writing experience. However, as Boice and Jones (1984) suggest, this practice may interfere with creativity and deter individuals from writing; if students are feeling uncomfortable about writing itself, it makes sense that it will be difficult for them to begin and complete a writing project.

In higher education, the trend in writing training is to focus on the product of writing. This research followed eight graduate students engaged in a writing workshop which was process-oriented. Instead of focusing exclusively on students' writing products, participants were encouraged to describe their feelings and experiences with writing. Further, following Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) model of behavior change, a major objective of the workshop was to empower students by raising their confidence levels and extending their expertise in the fundamentals of technical writing.

Research Methodology:

The sample was composed of a group of eight graduate students who are working toward their doctorates in clinical psychology. These students were selected for participation in the study after being identified by their major advisors as deficient in their technical writing skills.

These students experienced an intensive writing and reading process which involved numerous exercises that were designed to accomplish three goals: (1) "normalize" students' concerns about their writing, (2) improve their basic "technical"

writing skills, and (3) increase students' motivation to write and to learn about technical writing.

To begin, subjects' ability to write and edit a section of text were pre-tested by having subjects edit a series of sentences, some of which were "wordy," and others that were grammatically and syntactically incorrect. Then, a discussion format was used to "normalize" students' feelings and concerns about writing. Students were told to write their concerns anonymously and these concerns were then discussed by the entire group. In this way, students discussed common concerns about writing without necessarily identifying themselves as having a particular concern.

Participants in the study were then assigned sections of Strunk and White's (1979) Elements of Style. This book was selected for its clear and concise "no-nonsense" approach to grammar and syntax. Students were responsible for learning a short section of the book and then for teaching that section of information to the entire group of participants. This instructional tool was designed to address the research project's third goal, which was to empower students and to positively influence their motivation to learn about writing by having them teach themselves (with my support) a particular writing skill. For example, some students learned about omitting needless words, others learned about writing in the active voice, and other students learned about the appropriate use of colons and semi-colons. Students were also provided six other books that covered similar basic elements of grammar and syntax.[1] These additional sources were offered to students to supplement the information contained in the Strunk and White text.

Summary of Analytical Techniques:

Three separate writing workshops occurred on three different occasions. Data was collected from the following qualitative sources before, during, and within three days

[1] A list of these books appears at the end of this paper.

following each workshop: (a) interviews with workshop participants and faculty and (b) analysis of students' writing content. Further, a follow-up meeting was held approximately 6 months after the workshop to check on the students' writing progress and to solicit additional reactions to the writing workshop. Since the results were uniform between the three separate workshops, the data will be presented together.

Results:

All participants completed both process and content evaluations of their experience immediately after the workshop. Also, a follow-up meeting with the students and faculty took place on separate occasions.

To begin, overall reports from faculty and students indicate that the workshop was a resounding success. With respect to the first goal of the research (i.e., normalizing students' concerns about their writing), participants were asked to describe their feelings about writing. It appears that through listening to their peers' descriptions of their own writing fears, this has normalized some of their concerns and anxieties about writing. Five of the six participants specifically commented that since discovering that other students share these concerns, they felt better about their insecurities with writing. One comment by a student related this theme very succinctly: "By the time you get to graduate school, you believe everyone assumes you know about writing. Well I never learned how to write in a technical style. But it really is OK to not know about writing, even at the graduate-level."

In terms of the second goal of the research (i.e., improve students' basic "technical" writing skills), subjects edited the same series of sentences that they edited as a pre-test. In this way, it was possible to assess any changes in the subjects' editing ability. Three subjects commented that the task was considerably easier the second time in the sense that they were able to more quickly spot "wordy" or "sloppy" writing since the workshop. Also, four participant reported that they have received more positive feedback about their writing from faculty since the workshop. Subjects were also asked how

comfortable and confident they are feeling about writing. Five students reported feeling more secure about their writing skills. All six subjects responded that since the workshop they are now better able to critically evaluate their own writing and, moreover, that they are feeling more confident about their technical writing skills. In addition, all participants further reported that they believe their writing skills will only improve with practice.

Participants were also asked to describe the effects of having them read a section of a fellow student's dissertation. They were also asked to describe the effects of having them learn a section of Strunk and White's (1979) Elements of Style, and then teaching that section to the other participants. Apparently, through these exercises, students experienced a sense of writing empowerment. This, coupled with the opportunity to evaluate other students' writing samples, appeared to further increase students' confidence about their own writing.

With respect to the third goal (i.e., to increase students' motivation to write and to learn about technical writing), all six students reported that they are now more confident and motivated to improve their writing skills. A related comment from two students is that at least now they know where they need to go to find out information about writing and that it is not so intimidating to do so. One student commented: "I have not turned around my writing ability by 180 degrees, but I have taken an important step." Another student reported that writing is "not as painful as before." When asked about seeking feedback from faculty about their writing, five students reported that, since the workshop, they are feeling more willing to seek critical feedback from faculty about their writing. Interviews with faculty have confirmed that these participants have indeed been seeking such feedback.

Conclusion and Discussion:

The purpose of this study was to provide graduate students in clinical psychology with a process-oriented technical writing experience that was different from more

traditional product-oriented writing workshops. As such, students were first encouraged to discuss their feelings and concerns about writing research papers with a group of their peers. Participants were also responsible for both learning information about writing and, then, for teaching this information to fellow participants.

It appears that the process-orientation employed in this writing experience accomplished several objectives. First, students reported that they felt relief to know they were not the only ones with concerns about writing. This has been referred to as the process of normalization. Second, participants reported more confidence about their writing and less fear about writing. These findings were corroborated by several faculty who report that the participants were enthusiastic and positive about the workshop. However, although there are signs that the participants' writing may have improved, whether their writing shows sustained improvement, remains to be seen. This information will be obtained over time so that the long-term effects of this process-oriented writing experience can be determined.

It has long been established that process is an important aspect of education. Further, as this study suggests, process is an important tool to be utilized in writing instruction. Providing students with an opportunity to voice their concerns (and listen to others), and having students take responsibility for self-instruction (and instructing others), appears to empower student and it may serve to motivate and increase students' confidence in their writing skills.

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